

4 The Normans 1066-1154

In 1065 there was a crisis in the English kingdom. The Northumbrians revolted against Tostig and chose as their leader Morcar, the younger brother of Edwin, Earl of Mercia, both of whom were youths. Earl Harold confronted the forces of Edwin and Morcar at Northampton but much to the fury of the king and Tostig he decided to support them against his brother who was forced to flee vowing revenge. The king, it is said, was so upset by these events that he became ill, and died on 4th January 1066. He left no children but there was an heir of the Anglo-Saxon line, namely Edgar, the great-grandson of Ethelred II. Unfortunately he was only thirteen years old and had been brought up on the continent. His claim to the throne was unquestionably the best according to family inheritance but it was swept aside in a spectacular clash between three of the greatest warriors of the age, all of whom laid claim to the English kingdom. These three were Earl Harold of Wessex, **William, Duke of Normandy**, and Harold Hardrada, King of Norway.

Earl Harold was the most successful in the short term, despite having little grounds for his claim other than that he was the dead king's brother-in-law, and that Edward was said to have named him as his successor on his deathbed. However, Harold was a powerful man in England and he was proclaimed king by the Witan and crowned by Stigand, the Archbishop of Canterbury the day after Edward's death. An able warrior, the crowned king of a united kingdom, Harold's position might have seemed unshakeable : but his strong position did not deter either of his rivals, both of whom made immense preparations for large-scale invasions of England.

Harold Hardrada's claim to the throne was the weakest and depended upon an agreement between his father Magnus and Cnut's son Harthacnut, made many years before, that if either should die without a son the other would succeed to both Norway and England. William of Normandy's claim was more complex. There was a close family tie because William's father, Robert, Duke of Normandy, and Edward the Confessor were first cousins. But Robert never married and William was his illegitimate son by Arlette, the daughter of a tanner from Falaise. William's claim by family inheritance was therefore negligible, but he visited England in 1051 and it is possible that Edward agreed to make him his heir at that time. The **Bayeux Tapestry** (created after 1066 by Normans) claims that Harold swore a solemn oath to recognize William as Edward's heir, though there is no other known record of this. In any case, the oath was exacted under duress as Harold had been taken into custody by William when his ship was wrecked on the coast of Normandy.

William took care to seek the permission of the Pope for his attack on England, using the alleged 'broken oath' as a justification, and also making the most of the fact that Stigand had been excommunicated for illegally being Bishop of Winchester as well as Archbishop of Canterbury. Papal support was a great advantage to William in what was otherwise a colossal gamble. For the ruler of a comparatively insignificant duchy to challenge the Anglo-Saxon kingdom, a nation of hardened warriors, was considered by many to be folly. Undaunted, William ordered the construction of many ships, enlisted the help of the Counts of Brittany and Boulogne, and massed his troops in the Norman Channel ports. By early September 1066 he waited only for a favourable wind.

King Harold was well aware that he faced two invasions, and he was more than ready. He had summoned a great army and was fully supported by all his earls and thanes. If either of the invasions had taken place a few months earlier his task would have been a great deal easier. As it was his army grew restless throughout the summer, patrolling the south coast, and then it was suddenly faced with two invasions in the same month. Hardrada landed in the north-east early in September and was joined by Harold's brother Tostig, now seeking his revenge. The invaders swept aside the loyal forces of earls Edwin and Morcar at Fulford, outside York, on September 20th but met Harold at **Stamford Bridge**, on the river Derwent, on the 25th. In what would, but for Hastings, have been considered the battle of the century, Harold won an outstanding victory, routing the Norwegians and leaving Hardrada and Tostig slain upon the field. Unfortunately for Harold the wind changed in the Channel three days later and on September 28th William's impressive fleet landed unopposed on a defenceless south coast at Pevensey Bay. It was possible for him to disembark his men and horses in complete safety and he was allowed more than two weeks to organize his troops and march inland. On October 14th he met Harold's army, which had taken up a strong position on a ridge at Senlac, several miles inland from **Hastings**.

Harold and his men had marched under pressure some 300 miles, and many had been left behind. However, it was still a formidable force of about 12,000 footsoldiers which confronted William, who commanded a similar number of men, though unlike the Saxons he had a large contingent of cavalry. The battle began in the late morning and lasted until dusk. The Saxon infantry were difficult to dislodge from the top of their ridge and William's cavalry attacked many times without success. It appears that William then ordered his cavalry to pretend to flee, and this caused the Saxons to abandon the ridge in order to pursue them. The Normans were then able to turn on their enemies and cut them down more easily. Towards the evening Harold was killed, probably after being hit in the eye by an arrow, and this proved the turning point as there was no-one to take his place. What was left of the Saxon army disappeared into the night and William was left in possession of the field. However, the Saxons still held London and were not yet prepared to give in. The Witan elected young Edgar king and prepared to raise another army, while William marched on London. He reached London bridge but saw that it could not be taken by force and instead marched westward, laying waste the countryside as he went. Edgar and his supporters decided that their cause was hopeless and formally submitted to William north of London, and he was crowned in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day, 1066, by Aldred, Archbishop of York.

It is possible that, had the English accepted their new king without further struggle, the **Norman Conquest** would have had less drastic effects. As it was, William was faced with the constant threat of rebellion. In 1068 Harold's sons led a revolt in the West Country, while in 1069 there was a rising in York and an invasion by the King of Denmark. In 1070 William punished the northern rebels by systematically destroying the towns and villages of the region, and he embarked upon a policy of replacing English landholders and churchmen with loyal followers from Normandy. By his death no Saxon earls remained in office, and only one Saxon bishop, while Domesday Book recorded in 1086 that only two out of about 1450 landholders were English, and only 8 per cent of the land was still in English hands. Moreover, the loose form of feudalism that had existed before 1066 was remodelled because William made his grants of land to Normans specifically dependent upon their providing him with fighting men, especially knights, whenever he required them. The same military role was expected of all bishops and abbots, because they were also great landowners.

By the end of William's reign, England was ruled by a Norman king, Norman lords and Norman bishops, all of them holding their land by royal grants and tied to the king by a carefully defined military obligation. This, above all, is what was new about England after William's conquest. Moreover, because these foreign landowners lived among a suspicious, if not hostile population, they built castles to defend themselves. At first these consisted of a *motte* (mound), surrounded by a *bailey* (wall of defence) with a wooden fortification on the motte. Over the years impressive square 'keeps' were constructed in stone and based in style on the castle built by William in London. Many of these still survive in fine condition - the 'Tower of London' itself and impressive structures ranging from those at Dover and Rochester in the south to Bamburgh and 'Newcastle' in the north.

Stone castles had not been a feature of Anglo-Saxon England, so here was another major difference. What remained essentially the same was the way of life, language and legal customs of the Anglo-Saxon peasantry, though their obligation to work for their lord in return for the right to till the land was perhaps tighter, and William's declaration that all forests were to be preserved exclusively for royal hunting made vast tracts of the kingdom forbidden territory to country folk. After 1066 the *ceorl* was less free, though on the other hand the category of slave virtually disappeared.

In 1085 William ordered that a meticulous survey of his kingdom should be made, itemising every detail about who owned what land, how many people lived on it, what buildings there were and how many animals. The fact that this survey (nicknamed '**Domesday**' because it seemed to be as thorough as the Final Reckoning) was efficiently completed in 1086 within seventh months shows what a grip William had on the administration of his kingdom. In 1086 he summoned all landowners, great and small, to Salisbury, where they were required to take a personal oath of loyalty to the king. By ruthless determination, fighting skill and an administrative capacity amounting to genius, William created England in a new mould. All this was achieved despite the fact that he was frequently in Normandy dealing with a wide range of problems and rebellions there. A tough, stocky man he grew very fat in his last years and he died at the age of sixty in 1087 from the effects of a stomach injury sustained when his horse reared in fright and threw him against the pommel of his saddle. By his wife Matilda of Boulogne, a diminutive but able woman whom he trusted to be Regent of England during his absences, William had ten children. Three sons survived him, but he was on bad terms with the eldest, Robert, who had rebelled against him. In his will he therefore left Normandy to Robert, but not England, which he gave to the second son, William. The third son, Henry, was left only a sum of money - with which he was not content. The scene was set for intense family rivalry.

William II, nicknamed 'Rufus' because of his ruddy complexion, proved as tough and tenacious a king as his father, defeating numerous rebels in England and also gaining the duchy of Normandy which was pawned to him by Robert when he left with the first Crusade in 1096. While very seriously ill in 1093 William was persuaded against his better judgement to appoint the Italian scholar and monk **Anselm** to the archbishopric of Canterbury : after his recovery he much regretted this action because Anselm, already established as a champion of church and papal authority, claimed powers for the church which William (like his father) was not prepared to concede. Anselm went into voluntary exile in 1097, leaving church chronicles to depict William as evil and immoral. When he was killed by an arrow in mysterious circumstances in August 1100 while hunting in the New Forest, the legend of his wickedness grew, elaborated with stories of murder, witchcraft and vice - mostly the work of

clerical chroniclers loyal to Anselm. William's death has been elevated into one of the great unsolved mysteries of British history, but fatal hunting accidents at that time were by no means rare, and he may well just have been unlucky.

Robert of Normandy's claim to the throne was very strong, but he was known to be an indecisive and incompetent ruler and in any case he was in Sicily, getting married, when his brother was unexpectedly killed. The younger brother **Henry I** effectively usurped the throne, persuading the Bishop of London to crown him only hours after William's death. In a bid to acquire popularity he pledged that he would govern by the ancient laws of the kingdom, and to appease the church he invited Anselm to return from exile. He also married Matilda, a Scottish princess whose mother was directly descended from the Anglo-Saxon royal family. In this way he hoped to reconcile Saxon elements to Norman rule. Robert of Normandy invaded England in 1101 but settled for a money payment in place of the crown. This was a mistake because in 1106 Henry invaded Normandy, defeated his brother in battle and consigned him to a prison until his death 28 years later. He then proceeded to exercise firm control over both Normandy and England, as his father had done before him.

The conquest of England in 1066 and the establishment of Norman rule in the kingdom made comparatively little impact on the rest of the British Isles. The Irish continued to be governed by many minor chieftains, as did the Welsh, while **Scotland** remained under the rule of a single king, though in the century before 1066 rivalry for the crown often led to internal conflicts and dark deeds. Constantine III was killed in 997 by Kenneth III who in turn was killed by Malcolm II in 1005. On Malcolm's death in 1034 he was succeeded by his grandson Duncan I, who six years later was murdered by Macbeth, the son of Malcolm's sister. Despite the impression given in Shakespeare's play, Macbeth ruled Scotland for seventeen years until Duncan's son **Malcolm III**, with the assistance of Earl Siward of Northumbria, drove him from the throne. Malcolm ruled for thirty-five years, observing from the safety of Scotland William of Normandy's conquest of the southern kingdom and giving refuge to Edgar Atheling and his sisters Margaret and Christina. In 1070, after the death of his first wife, Malcolm married Margaret, so that the blood of the Anglo-Saxon royal house flowed in the veins of Scottish rulers until 1290.

In 1072 William marched to the Scottish borders and made a pact with Malcolm, in return for receiving homage from him. Peace lasted for twenty years until in 1092 Malcolm decided to test the mettle of William Rufus by making attacks across the border. William made an agreement with him that year but took his revenge in 1093 when he defeated the Scots at a battle in which Malcolm was killed, with one of his sons. Confusion ensued as Malcolm's brother Donald Bane seized the throne only to be deposed a few months later by his nephew Duncan II. Donald Bane fought back and defeated Duncan in 1094, keeping the throne until 1097 when he was deposed by another of Malcolm's sons, Edgar, and it was his sister whom Henry I of England married in 1100. The chronicler William of Malmesbury described the new Queen as *despicabilis formae* (small and unattractive): she played no part in state affairs but bore Henry three children, William, Richard and Matilda, and this link between the Scottish and English royal houses helped to preserve peace between them for the rest of Henry's reign.

Having gained control over Normandy and made a marriage alliance with Scotland, Henry I was able to make important contributions to the legal and administrative development of England. Guided by his able Chancellor Roger, bishop of Salisbury, the former Anglo-Saxon

Witan made the transition into the *Curia Regis* (King's Council) which was both a court of justice and a financial exchequer (a name derived from the chequered board on which money was counted). Financial and other records began to be kept methodically and travelling justices ensured that the law was upheld. Henry also came to an important agreement with Archbishop Anselm that bishops and abbots were in future to be chosen and invested by the church, doing homage to the king only for the lands they held, but in other respects being subject to the authority of the Pope.

A serious blow hit Henry's plans for peace and stability when in 1120 his two sons William and Richard were drowned in a shipwreck. Though Henry, a notorious womaniser, had numerous illegitimate children his one remaining legitimate child was a daughter, **Matilda**, the wife of the Emperor of Germany. Henry quickly married again but no further heirs were produced, and he faced the embarrassing situation that his heir was his elder brother Robert of Normandy (still in prison) followed by Robert's son William Clito. However, in 1125 Matilda's husband died and she returned home, aged thirty-one. Henry decided to take the risk of requiring his barons to recognize her as his heir, and in 1127 he arranged for her to marry Geoffrey, the fifteen-year old son of his most important continental ally, Count Fulk of Anjou. The following year William Clito died, making Henry's plans for the succession look secure. Spending the winter of 1135 in Rouen, Henry feasted on a dish of lampreys, a great delicacy but known to be bad for his health. He fell into a fever and died a week later on December 1st, the stench from his body apparently killing his embalmer.

Matilda was in Anjou when her father died, and she proclaimed herself Queen of England. However, despite the fact that the English barons had taken an oath of allegiance to her, many did not wish her to be Queen, largely because they did not want England to be ruled by her husband, Geoffrey of Anjou. Within three weeks of Henry's death his nephew **Stephen** was crowned king at Westminster. He was the son of Adela, a daughter of William I by her husband the Count of Blois, and he was handsome, popular with the people of London and well supported by a baronial faction led by his brother Henry, bishop of Winchester. Faced with the coronation and general acceptance of Stephen as king there was little that Matilda could do for the moment.

All the Norman kings had needed to maintain their authority by putting down rebellions ruthlessly. Stephen soon revealed that he was weak in this respect. He showed too much lenience to rebels in Exeter in 1136 and failed to prevent Geoffrey of Anjou attacking Normandy in 1137, with the result that Stephen eventually lost control of the duchy. King David I of Scotland invaded the north in the summer of 1138 and was beaten at Northallerton - though by an army led by the Archbishop of York, not by Stephen. Robert, Earl of Gloucester, one of the most powerful barons in England and an illegitimate son of Henry I, declared his support for Matilda in the same year, while Stephen's failure to secure the appointment of his brother Henry as Archbishop of Canterbury strained relations between them. In 1139 Matilda landed in England and a civil war began between her supporters and those of Stephen, continuing until 1153. It lasted for so long because both sides were evenly matched and because no decisive battle was won.

During the civil war there was serious disruption of the royal administration and a decline in the authority of the king. Rebel barons built themselves castles without permission and in some cases terrorized the local population, especially in East Anglia. Matilda's best chance of success came in February 1141 when Stephen was captured after a battle at Lincoln : she

was proclaimed queen in April but soon alienated her supporters by her haughty manner and unpopular taxes. By September Stephen had been rescued from prison and the fighting resumed. Stephen must be credited with tenacity because he maintained his position for the next twelve years despite opposition from rebels and also the influential church leader Bernard of Clairvaux.

Matilda left England in 1148 but her cause was taken up by Henry, her eldest son by Geoffrey of Anjou. He was knighted at the age of 16 in 1149 by King David of Scotland, who hoped to benefit by this alliance. In 1150 Henry was invested as Duke of Normandy by his father, who died in 1151, and in 1152 he married Eleanor, Duchess of Aquitaine. At the age of nineteen he was thus the ruler of Anjou, Maine, Touraine, Normandy and Aquitaine - more than half of France. In 1153 he crossed to England to fight for his rights as his mother's heir, and the English barons, tired of constant warfare, agreed a compromise. Stephen would keep the throne for the rest of his life, but on his death it would pass to Henry. Stephen might well have lived for many years, during which the balance of power might have shifted : as it was he died a year later, in 1154, and Henry II became the most powerful ruler in Christendom.

While England was disturbed by civil wars **Scotland** was making important progress under capable rulers. King Edgar died unmarried in 1107 to be succeeded by his brother Alexander I who married Sybilla, an illegitimate daughter of Henry I of England. Because they produced no children the throne passed on Alexander's death in 1124 to another brother, **David I**, who proved to be one of Scotland's greatest kings. His policy was to bring his kingdom more into the mainstream of European affairs, and he encouraged Norman knights to settle in Scotland. Among these was Robert de Brus from the Cotentin, and Walter Fitzalan. David appointed Walter his Steward and his descendants became known as the house of Stewart. Other famous Scottish families founded at this period by Normans included the Balliols, Comyns, Grahams and Lindsays. David also encouraged religious orders from Europe to settle and establish the great monasteries of Jedburgh, Kinloss, Holyrood, Melrose and Dryburgh, among others. Royal administration was greatly improved, royal castles were constructed and counties were established on the English model, controlled by sheriffs responsible to the king's Justiciar.

David married Matilda, heiress of the English Earl of Huntingdon whose lands he inherited after the earl's death. This meant that he was required to do homage to both Henry I and Stephen, not as King of Scotland, but as an English baron, and during the civil war he played a political game, safeguarding his interests as both Scottish king and an English landowner. At first he was loyal to Stephen but he changed sides five times before consistently supporting Matilda from 1141 onwards. When David died in 1153 Scotland, despite its tiny population, was becoming a significant European nation organized on similar lines to the English kingdom and in close touch with the latest movements in continental church reform.

Stephen's reign in England should not be remembered only for the disruptions of civil war. Paradoxically it was also a period of remarkable expansion of **monasteries**, many of which were founded by barons as compensation for the destruction they caused elsewhere. Most of the new houses were influenced by the **Cistercians**, an order based on the abbey of Citeaux in France which demanded austerity, simplicity and the rejection of luxury: in general the new monasteries were situated in remote locations. At least twelve were founded in the last five years of Henry I's reign and at least 34 in Stephen's reign, nine in 1147 alone. Some of these, such as Fountains or Rievaulx in Yorkshire later became vast and architecturally

beautiful but the original Cistercian ideal, and that of Bernard of Clairvaux, its most influential agent, was simplicity. The construction of these new monastic houses, taken together with the fifty or so existing Benedictine foundations meant that in twelfth century England no-one was very far away from a monastery.

The other common feature of the English landscape at this time was the **castle**, because in addition to the existing royal castles there were many - some authorized and some not - built by individual barons. The great majority consisted of formidable square 'keeps' solidly constructed in stone and often surrounded by extensive walls. The Normans encouraged trade and favoured towns which grew in number and size after 1066, often in the shadow of the lord's castle. Domestic dwellings were still unimpressive, with most peasants, or 'serfs', living in rudimentary thatched huts, while even the manorial lord's house would be relatively simple. William Rufus built the magnificent Westminster Hall, the nearest thing at the time to a 'palace', and one of the most spectacular buildings of its kind in Europe. The real architectural marvels of the Norman period were about a dozen great **cathedrals** such as Canterbury, Durham, Lincoln and Norwich, rebuilt and enlarged in the traditional 'romanesque' style that had been established in Europe for more than a thousand years. Hugely impressive even today, they were the work of local craftsmen driven on by the dynamism of successive bishops appointed for the most part from Norman clergy.